The Miseducation of the African Americans: Rethinking the Role of Education for Marginalized Populations Around the Globe

10/6/2023   0 Comments

Abstract

This is a conceptual review designed to clarify the characteristics and usage of Galtung's notions of structural and cultural violence as an overarching framework to situate educational research. Leveraging this framework as a lens to critique education unveils the structures and strategies used to sustain racism and other forms of discrimination. We utilize existing scholarship on the educational experiences of marginalized populations to demonstrate the relevance of Galtung's discussion of structural and cultural violence and to elucidate strategies to transform inequitable educational systems. Discussions by Carter G. Woodson (1919; 1933), Frantz Fanon (1961), Paolo Freire (1968), Patricia Williams (1987) and Bettina Love's (2016) notion of Spirit-Murder, and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2022)

Keywords: Conceptual Review; Structural Violence; Social Justice; Race and Education

Introduction

The U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Constitution established the freedoms purportedly extended to all citizens of a newly formed nation and at the same time conceptualized 'blackness' and therefore black people as inferior and unworthy. The American contradiction is that the country embraced individual freedoms exclusively for white, wealthy men while simultaneously codifying the enslavement of African Americans, the removal of Native Americans from land, the subjugation of white women and the marginalization of the poor. In the United States, race was simultaneously a means for distributing rights and resources and justifying that distribution, thereby enshrining laws that perpetuated white supremacy (Banks et al., 2016, p. 3). This history has left an indelible mark on contemporary society despite false narratives that racism is dead.

Racial injustice in the United States is endemic. Americans overwhelmingly believe that somehow the United States is a bastion of equality and fairness despite past and recent history. This mythology prevents historically marginalized groups from realizing the American dream. Moreover, explanations justifying ongoing racial disparities in every sector of our society blame the very people targeted by discrimination. Given this country's racial and gendered history, it is not surprising that Americans wanted to believe Barack Obama's election as the 44th President of the United States signaled a change. However, the public lynchings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by the police, the murder of Ahmaud Arbery by citizens, and the government's response to the Black Lives Matter Movement resulting from these tragedies highlight the persistence of racial and class inequities in the United States (Gaynor et al., 2021; Sirleaf, 2021;Bazian, 2020). Added to the racial/political climate is a global pandemic that unmasked the racial and class inequities in the United States healthcare system (Wang et al., 2020). So, while Americans would like to relegate racism to individual ignorance that will eventually dissipate over time, the current climate suggests that white privilege is an integral part of the culture in the United States, because race still matters.

This notion that racism and discrimination is rooted in the individual allows the average American to abhor racism and discrimination while simultaneously opposing systemic strategies, like affirmative action; defunding the police; support for the unemployed; universal healthcare; and, restructuring student loan debt, that seek to redress structural issues. Moreover, if most U.S. citizens could vote for an African American man as President of the United States, individuals must have transcended the type of individual ignorance believed to be the cornerstone of racism and discrimination in the U.S. If U.S. citizens believed in a post-racial society after the election of Obama, the installment of the 45th POTUS dispelled that myth. Moreover, the 2017 skirmishes in Charlottesville and POTUS' response solidify the adage that racism is alive and well in the United States. Most astounding was a 2016 police dash cam video wherein a Georgia police officer in Cobb County assured a white female driver saying "Remember, we only kill black people!" (Available 8/31/2017 at Watch As Georgia Cop Tells White

Racism and discrimination are the result of more than just individual ignorance; in fact, popular attitudes about racially diverse groups are driven by an overarching system that legitimizes inequitable outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to refine our understanding and usage of Galtung's concept of structural violence and its application to education research. Gessler and Siemer (2020) would characterize this paper as a conceptual review because its aim is to clarify the characteristics and usage of Galtung's notions of structural and cultural violence as an overarching framework to situate educational research. Leveraging this framework as a lens to critique education will unveil the structures and strategies used to sustain racism and other forms of discrimination. To facilitate this discussion, we utilize existing scholarship on the educational experiences of marginalized populations to demonstrate the relevance of Galtung's discussion of structural and cultural violence and to elucidate strategies to transform inequitable educational systems. Discussions by Carter G. Woodson (1919; 1933), Frantz Fanon (1961), Paolo Freire (1968), Patricia Williams (1987) and Bettina Love's (2016) notion of Spirit-Murder, and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2022) concept of Dreamkeepers will be leveraged to demonstrate the relevance of structural and cultural violence for framing educational research and informing professional practice.

Galtung's Notions of Structural and Cultural Violence

Galtung (1990) defined violence as "avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible" (p. 292). "Avoidable insults to basic human needs" are the result of a system of relationships designed to marginalize opportunities and diminish outcomes. More insidious than the direct violence that occurs between two individuals, this definition allows us to include slavery; the system of sharecropping; the existence of a minimum wage for labor that perpetuates poverty; segregated schools; inequitable funding in schooling post-desegregation; the school to prison pipeline (Redfield & Nance, 2016); the continued reliance on standardized tests deemed culturally-biased yet not significantly correlated with college completion; racial and class inequities in the justice system; and, police brutality as features of a society that perpetuates violence disproportionately against African Americans and other diverse and economically marginalized populations. Essentially, the history of African descendants in the United States is a story of violence. From slavery to contemporary schools that underinvest in economically vulnerable African American children, it is difficult to conceptualize Galtung's perspective on violence without recognizing that the United States has erected various structures to perpetrate violence against and to encourage violence within black communities. In fact, the level of violence that the African diaspora experiences in the United States suggests the existence of a violent culture predicated on the destruction of black and brown bodies. Structural violence could not exist alongside an ideology of 'the land of the free and home of the brave' without the emergence of cultural violence.

Galtung (1990) charges cultural violence with "changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/acceptable" (p. 292). Cultural violence in the U.S. makes the killing of black children less problematic. According to Chan (2012), the casting of Rue in the *Hunger Games*

original intent, some white adults found it difficult to mourn the death of a small child who was speared through her side simply because cultural violence renders the destruction of black bodies acceptable, even desirable or warranted. This reaction to the destruction of mythical black bodies is recreated in reality as exemplified in the publics' reaction to police shootings of black people. Hudak (2023), in his coverage of a recent school shooting at a private, Christian school in Nashville, Tennessee, chronicled country music celebrities' support for more restrictive gun laws in a state that allows citizens to openly carry guns and in a music community that historically supports gun rights. This delayed reaction to the proliferation of mass shootings and public police lynchings like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd is possible because of an emotional numbness caused by its frequency. It becomes normalized, the destruction of black bodies in the physical sense and in the emotional trauma experienced by African Americans and other diverse populations. But a school shooting at a private, white Christian school in the country music capitol was perceived abnormal and therefore worthy of a public reaction capable of changing government support for lax gun laws (Hudak, 2023).

Endemic Violence in the United States

From its inception, the United States codified tenets of white supremacy and black inferiority in its founding documents, thereby embracing racism as a core value. The U.S. Constitution "granted Congress the power to respond to slave insurrections; declared that slaves who escaped into free states remained slaves; established slaves as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation in the House of Representatives; prohibited the abolition of slavery, and any amendments that would impair the slave trade" (Banks et al., 2016, p. 1). In *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Taney wrote that those persons who were the descendants of Africans who were imported into the country and sold as slaves were not citizens and "therefore [could] claim none of the rights and privileges which the US Constitution provide[d] for and secure[d] to citizens of the United States" (*Dred Scott V. Sandford*, 1857, 60 U.W. 393 as cited in Banks et al., 2016, p. 17). The Chief Justice made clear that slaves and their descendants were "not intended to be embraced in this new political family, which the Constitution brought into existence" (Banks et al., 2016, p. 19). How could a new political family argue for its own inalienable rights and freedoms while systematically excluding slaves and their descendants with no specific mention of women whatsoever? An ideology of white supremacy simultaneously justified white male privilege and established the 'uncivilized' nature of the racialized "Others" thereby justifying their servitude. Even after passage of Amendment XIII to the U.S. Constitution abolishing slavery and Amendment XIV restricting states from inequitable treatment of its citizens based on race or the prior status of servitude, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legalized racial segregation and became the cornerstone for the establishment of public schools that were inherently unequal.

In a discussion about the process of decolonization, Fanon (2004)[1] argued that change required a "decisive confrontation between the two protagonists" (p. 3), the colonized and the colonists, in an effort to reorganize society. In the case of the United States, African Americans' experiences in the United States are reflected in Fanon's conceptualization of oppression in capitalist societies; the practice of

hierarchy of opportunity and supported by an educational system for ex-slaves, manual or industrial training (Washington, 1907) designed to perpetuate white supremacy and black inferiority. He described a violent colonized world demarcated by "barracks and police stations" and rife with police officers and soldiers. But subjugation of a numerical minority in capitalist societies could be achieved by an education designed to instill in the "exploited a mood of submission and inhibition" while "confusion-mongers intervene[d] between the exploited and the authorities" (Fanon, 2004, p. 4) to prevent rejection of the status quo or, in the case of the United States, the establishment of a racial hierarchy of opportunity predicated on white privilege and the destruction of black bodies and minds.

For Fanon (2004) acquiescence in a capitalist society was possible with indirect violence, while colonized populations would endure direct violence to ensure their compliance. Although prophetic in his ability to foresee the emergence of neo-colonialism[2] prior to the liberation of many African countries, Fanon's assumption that the nature of racial violence in the United States would be less masked is erroneous. In fact, the end of slavery was succeeded by Jim Crow laws that marginalized African Americans in every sector of life simply based on the color of one's skin or race. It is in this historical context that Fanon's discussion of colonization resonates with the African American experience in the United States; this experience is not monolithic, but a disproportionate number of African Americans and other diverse groups attend poorly funded, under-performing schools; reside in communities that are underserved and over-policed; have limited access to affordable housing, low-cost, nutritious food, and healthcare; and, are more likely to experience homelessness, mental health issues, and incarceration. Ironically, social science research designed to illuminate strategies to alleviate inequities typically adopts methodological strategies and data collection strategies that reinforce existing patterns of privilege and disadvantage while leaving structural relationships that perpetuate racism and discrimination intact and opaque.

Black Education and Structural Violence

American mythology asserts that education is a vehicle for upward mobility. Concerned that illiteracy made slaves predisposed to exploitation, slaveholders were opposed to educating Negroes prior to 1935 (Woodson, 1999). But, the visibility of "intelligent Negroes", aligned with abolitionists, disproved theories of black mental inferiority forcing Southern whites to address the type of training Negroes received. Woodson (1919) classified early advocates of black education into three categories: 1) slave masters concerned about the economic efficiency of their labor supply: 2) sympathizers who wanted to help the oppressed, and, 3) zealous religious missionaries interested in converting slaves to Christianity. By the 1930's, Woodson (1933)[3] characterized education as a process that imbued "educated Negroes" with contempt for their own people (p. 1). Not surprising, teachers played a pivotal role in the vision for manual or industrial training because they were socialized to reinforce a subordinate economic reality for blacks (Washington,1907).

Freire (1970) contends that traditional education is designed to "change the consciousness of the oppressed" (p. 74) through a banking approach to education that renders knowledge a transaction

school curricula is designed to dehumanize them and to bind them perpetually to a reality shaped by historical notions of white supremacy and black inferiority. 'Columbus discovered America?', the teacher said. Concentric to liberation for black and brown students is the ability to pose problems that allow them to critique their lived reality. Teachers are able to facilitate the liberation or on-going oppression of their students.

The Role of the Teacher

In Freire's critique of traditional education systems, teachers are "narrating Subjects", and students are "patient, listening objects" (Freire, 1970, p. 71). This "banking concept" of education results in the dehumanization or spirit murder of students (Love, 2016). In traditional classroom environments students' voices are suffocated and replaced with a truth that contradicts their lived realities. This distorted reality is possible because of a series of intersecting structures that reinforce white male contributions and the exclusion of the contributions of diverse populations to the evolution of civilization, except during Black History Month, Women's History Month, etc. Ironically, these strategies buttressed by frameworks like Critical Race Theory leveraged to train a relatively homogeneous teaching force to instruct an increasingly diverse student population more effectively, are currently under political attack. Critical Race Theory and multicultural education represent a framework and curricula used to foster values like equity and social justice. West (2022), Saunders (2022) Boardman (2023) chronicle current efforts in Virginia, Florida and South Caroline to prohibit what the public perceives to be the instruction of Critical Race Theory in K-12 classrooms, the inclusion of books representing diverse perspectives in school curricula, and anti-racist/anti-discrimination curricula. Unlike challenges to affirmative action designed to redress the underrepresentation of historically marginalized populations across sectors, integrating diverse perspectives through the academic curricula dispel the mythology of white supremacy and black inferiority thereby creating a society that can evolve into a land of opportunity for everyone.

Traditional education, in its representation of voice and the stories of the architects of society, can enlighten and empower all students or perpetuate a version of history that distorts who belongs and what we have the potential to be (Freire, 1970). When we negate or denigrate the contributions of diverse populations, the murder of children's spirits (Williams 1987). Williams (1987) defined spirit-murder as a crime of racism and "so deeply painful and assaultive… victims of racism must convince others that they were not at fault, or that they did not misunderstand the circumstances or perpetrators' intent." This process includes the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturing, and acceptance by institutions that are inherently racist (Love, 2016).

Ladson-Billings (1995, 2022) Dreamkeeper is antithetical to the teachers that proliferate in Freire's traditional classrooms. Dreamkeepers adopt culturally relevant pedagogies designed to perpetuate the academic success of all children. Grounded in Afrocentric Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Critical Race Feminism, CRP has three criteria: 1) academic success, 2) cultural competence, and 3) critical consciousness with the expectation that educators actively strive to increase their understanding

(Ladson-Billings, 2022; Freire, 1993); it is the type of education that creates a climate conducive to the type of change envisioned by Fanon.

A Way Forward: Through the Lens of Structural Cultural Violence

One semester, I started my graduate class with the following statement: What if schools are designed to perpetuate racial and economic inequalities? To reproduce violent structures that limit the opportunity of people because of the color of their skin? How would that change what we do in research? A similar question was posed when we presented this conceptual paper at the 5th WCCES Symposium. First, to adopt structural violence and cultural violence as a lens through which we view our society allows us to see the intersecting nature of power and privilege. It allows us to develop intersecting strategies to reduce patterns of privilege and discrimination. For example, when we articulate affirmative action or preferential treatment as an age-old strategy that initially privileged white, land-owning males; a contemporary strategy used to build competitive athletic teams or music departments; as one of many strategies used for social engineering, the public backlash against affirmative action is rooted in the saliency of white supremacy and the protection of white privilege. Our educational research has the capacity to promote a broader discourse that situates strategies for social engineering as necessary to combat legacies of efforts designed to establish and protect the privilege of some and the disadvantage of others. Or, we can continue to adopt metrics for student success that we know are racially and culturally biased thereby rendering findings that support a version of society that will be a growing nightmare for us all.

References

Banks, R. R., Forde-Mazrui, K, Charles, G., Rodriguez, C. M. (2016). *Racial justice and law: Cases and materials.* Foundation Press.

Bazian, H. (2020). "I can't breathe". *Islamophobia Studies Journal, 5*(2), 124-133. Google Scholar. 10.13169/islastudj.5.2.0124

Boardman, F. (2023, February 21). Lawsuit filed against CCSD claims students being taught Critical Race Theory in classrooms. Retrieved 3/31/2023 from https://abcnews4.com/news/local/lawsuit-filed-against-ccsd-claims-students-are-taught-critical-race-theory-in-classrooms-wciv-education-board-members-charleston-county-district-school

Fanon, F. (2004). *The wretched of the earth* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1st ed). Continuum.

Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry,* 43(1), 48-70. https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002

Gaynor, T. S., Kang, S. C., & Williams, B. N. (2021, 2). Segregated spaces and separated races: The relationship between state-sanctioned violence, place, and black violence. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of Social Sciences, 7*(1), 50-66. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2021.7.1.04

Hudak, J. (2023, March 28). Country DJ Bobby Bones reacts to Nashville school shooting: 'your politicians   don't   care   for   you'.   *RollingStones,*   Accessed   3/31/2023 https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/nashville-school-shooting-bobby-bones-gun-control-

Saunders, J. (2022, July 8). A lawsuit against race-based teaching in Florida can proceed. *WSUF Public Media*. Retrieved 3/31/2023 from https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/education/2022-07-08/lawsuit-race-based-teaching-florida-can-proceed

Sirleaf, M. (2021, 6 1). Disposable lives: COVID-19, vaccines, and the uprising. *Columbia Law Review*, *121*(5), 71-94. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27033038

Wang, M. L., Behrman, P., Dulin, A., Baskin, M. L., Buscemi, J., Alcaraz, K. I., Goldstein, C. M., Carson, T. L., Shen, M., & Fitzgibbon, M. (2020, 6 1). Addressing inequities in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality: research and policy recommendations. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, *10*(3), 516-519. https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibaa055

Washington, B.T. (1907). *Up from slavery*. Doubleday, Page & CO. Available 2/1/2023 at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Up_From_Slavery/xN45ZsUMgKEC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=up+from+slavery&printsec=frontcover

West, S. (2022, January 4). Virginia parents take critical race theory to court: Lawsuit says the controversial curriculum fosters racial discrimination in public schools. World News Group. Retrieved 3/31/2023 from https://wng.org/roundups/virginia-parents-take-critical-race-theory-to-court-1641324117

Woodson, C.G. (1919). *The education of the Negro prior to 1861: A history of the education of the colored people of the United States from the beginning of slavery to the Civil War.*

Woodson, C. G. (1999). *The mis-Education of the Negro*. 12th Media Services.

[1] Originally published in the French language by Francois Maspero (1961) under the title Damnés de la terre.

[2] The use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies. (Merriam-Webster, 2022)

[3] Originally published in 1933 by the Associated Publishers.

Like 0   Post

0 Comments

Author(s)

Dr. Kimberly L. King-Jupiter
Professor
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, Policy and Law
College of Education
Alabama State University
USA

&

Sharonda O. Phelps, M.Ed.

Doctoral Candidate

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, Policy and Law

College of Education

Alabama State University

USA

Archives

October 2023

Categories

All

🔊 RSS Feed

世界比较教育学会联合会
المجلس العالمي لجمعيات التربية المقارنة